For the Little Pioneer Church

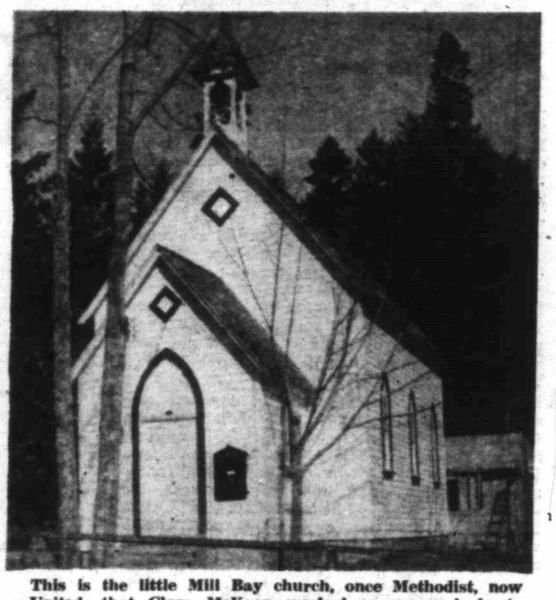
By N. P. DOUGAN

OLD HANS GAVE $50

SHAWNIGAN was a silent and empty land wherein nature provided few arable spaces; and the land was not naturally fertile. Few and isolated were the settlers.

"No place to solemnize the weddings; to christen the children. No dedicated place to lay the dead!"

It was Clara Copley McKean who was speaking. Her audience was the "Major", her husband, and his cousin, Rev. Jerry McKean, itinerant preacher. Rev. Jerry was a native of Ohio and had come west on a visit.



This is the little Mill Bay church, once Methodist, now United, that Clara McKean worked so persuasively to achieve.

It was a nine days wonder when Miss Clara Copley, young, intelligent and pretty, had married "Major" J. W. McKean, old enough, they said, to be her grandfather!

"Major" McKean was a veteran of the U.S. Civil War, and nobody begrudged him the self-assumed title. Indeed, the folk came to accept it as a fitting compliment for the old soldier.

Whether it was that she had a premonition of what the future would reveal; or whether as a young girl she'd seen members of her family laid to rest in a forgotten wood; or because of inherent piety, Clara, now with all the vehemence of ardent youth, wished to see a church established in the community. And upon every occasion she strove to convince others of her worthy aim.

Clara could speak convincingly; "A church," she said, "in our own community whose services would not be too formal, and would appeal to people of simple faith, and indeed to those who have experienced no particular faith at all. And now that cousin Jerry is here, let's organize a camp-meeting, enthuse the neighbors and evoke interest in a church-building project."

"But," objected the major, "where is the money to come from? We are all so impecunious. I doubt if $100—if $50—could be raised in the whole settlement!" The major was pessimistic. In money matters, they said, he was as "tight as the bark on a tree!"

"Oh, we could raise some money," with sententious ardor, Clara persisted. "And we shall build the church with our own labor, co-operatively and freely. Let's strive to convince others. There's Francis Garnett now, a born leader; if only we could convince him, induce him . . ."

But Francis Walker Garnett, intellectual, socialist-of-the-Utopian school and self-avowed agnostic was not, it seemed, to be inveigled into the church project.

However, with Clara's eager faith, Rev. Jerry's encouragement and experience, and the major's approval, the camp-meeting was arranged. The selected place was a forest glade surrounded by moss-bowered maples and huge cedars, at Mill Bay; and word got around.

From far-off Shawnigan Lake they came, the sawmill hands with their wives and children; and came also some of the loggers from beyond the lake, rowing across by boat. They came trudging along the dusty road. And from isolated, forest-environed little farms, they came to the camp-meeting.

Now there was old Hans Peter Peterson. He'd come 'round the Horn in some creaking old windjammer; made his way here and homed in this land. So long he'd been here, no one could remember when he'd come, nor why he'd settled.

These were silent, lonely years in the pristine circumambient forest; with a whispering of wind in the tree tops, and not far away, the sea. On stormy days he could hear its restless plangency, and the sea-mews' plantive calling.

The loneliness of his life can be imagined. No others within miles and miles, so it's not to be wondered at that he took to his hearth and home, a little Indian woman for wife. He called her Kitty.

He was a Hercules of a man, this Hans Peterson, people said. He'd hitch himself to a log and draw it along like an ox! As he cleared the little farm, the years passed, and almost before he realized it, he was old. Kitty had grown old, too; she just faded away and died. Then the old man sold his farm, and went and made his home in a snug little cabin beside his friends, the Chapmans.

Through all the years of his early peregrinations, Hans had kept his old-fashioned Danish Bible, and now poring over its sacred literature was his consolation; and when the Chapmans asked him to come with them to the camp-meeting, the old man assented gladly.

On a Sunday the old mule was hitched to the spick-and-span wagon. Grey-haired William Chapman sat in the driver's seat with his wife beside him. On a board seat behind them sat their daughters, demure little Miss Mary, curly brown hair in ringlets, and Sabina (later Mrs. Manley). On the wagon's hay-cushioned floor sat Hans—he was very old. With a "hup thar, Barney," the mule took his stride and they jogged off to the camp-metting.

Long before you came to the place, you could hear the singing—the lilt of it came cadencing through the woods. Coming closer, you could even hear some of the words of the refrain: "Oh, the bird with the broken pinion never soared so high again." In a pleasing baritone, the singer sang of one who'd experienced all of life's emotions of good and evil and fallen by the wayside, and when all hope seemed abandoned, he'd accepted the true faith, and snatched like a brand from the burning, he was saved to celestial bliss.

In a natural amphitheatre shadowed by spreading maples near the sea-bank, sitting or reclining on the moss-carpeted ground, was gathered a group of people. The centre of attraction was the evangelist, a man of perhaps 50, dark featured, moustached, a little under the average height but sturdily built and in a rough-hewn way, handsome. You could see he held his audience spellbound.

On certain evenings and on Sundays of those glorious summer days the camp-meeting continued. For the settlers it was a social and happy time. As the days began to wane, a large tent was erected on a board platform that had been built for dancing, benches were installed and the services continued.

It was the last of the camp-meeting series and late summer, 1897.

With unanimity all agreed to contribute free labor for the construction of the church; but to be determined was the knotty question of how to raise the money for the purchase of materials, and a church site.

To all this, Hans Peter Peterson, seated near the front so that he could hear, listened with rapt attention. Presently the call came for monetary contributions, whereupon the old man spoke and said: "I will give $50 for the building of the church."

Now Rev. McKean, thinking there was a misunderstanding—old Hans had a singularly low-pitched voice for so 'great' a man—explained, "Mr. Peterson means he will give $5."

Then all eyes were turned upon him as the venerable man rose ponderously to his feet, and taking his purse from his pocket, he extracted therefrom $50 in gold—he had a strange reluctance to holding paper currency and exchanged it for gold at the first opportunity—and handed it to the treasurer with the explicit assurance: "I give $50 for building of the church."

From the moment of inception, Francis Garnett was an interested spectator at the camp-meetings, and ere conclusion of the evangelical effort, the erstwhile agnostic became one of the most loyal and forthright supporters of the church.

Resolved as the most suitable locale for the churchyard was part of a block of land owned by the pioneer lumberman, William P. Sayward, who'd operated a sawmill at Mill Bay in the 60s and 70s. And now, Francis Garnett as the leading spirit of the project committee, was deputed to go to Victoria to meet Mr. Sayward, and arrange for acquisition of the land on as liberal terms as possible. He returned shortly with the free title deed for the desirable acre of ground, regarding which Mr. Sayward made no stipulations, but in remembrance of his early association with the district and Mill Bay, he expressed a wish that all early settlers who desired it, should be given free interment in the churchyard. (This has been granted. All early settlers lie on the south side, and later ones on the north side of the church).

The lumber was bought from the Shawnigan Lake Lumber Company (some of which was almost certainly donated, but this, we are not able to verify) and hauled to the church site with horses.

The interested settlers now gathered for the building of their church, and under the capable leadership of Francis Garnett, the Mill Bay Methodist Church—except for some minor details—was completed in the autumn of 1897.

The following year on May 28, the church—then debt-free—was formally dedicated by the Rev. Mr. Winslow. The probationary acceptance of five members of the Garnett family and four of the Copleys, made the ceremony a memorable one.

And soon there were weddings. The first was pretty May Horrel of Salt Spring Island to Judson Copley. Then, T. P. (Pat) Barry and George Frayne married sisters; respectively, Miss Lettitia and Miss Minnie Garnett. A little later, spurred by Cupid's darts, Robert Cavin led Miss May Chapman to the altar.

Through the years there were many weddings in the little church, and, of course, there followed the christenings. So now, Clara Copley McKean had her ardent wish fulfilled. There was a place for the weddings; for the christenings; and when each his course had run, a dedicated place to await the edict of eternity.

And Mr. Sayward's wish was not forgotten, for beside the church they founded sleep many of the early settlers. And there, too, beside his friends, the Chapmans, reposes the dust of generous Hans Peter Peterson.

"Major" J. W. McKean and his bride, Miss Clara Copley.